

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001479

SIPDIS

FOR SA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 8/12/12

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: Amidst vehement rhetoric, President leaves door open for cohabitation negotiations

REF: (A) FBIS Reston VA dtg 120351Z Aug 02

- (B) FBIS Reston VA dtg 100639Z Aug 02
- (C) Colombo 1433
- (D) Colombo 1403

(U) Classified by Ambassador E. Ashley Wills. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) Summary: On August 9, the President delivered a televised speech to the nation that focused on cohabitation with the ruling United National Front (UNF) and the peace process. The President opened her national address with conciliatory remarks, but halfway through morphed into attack mode, assailing her cohabitant - the UNF. Political observers differ on their interpretation of the President's present position, but overall there is some faint hope that cohabitation may yet work. End Summary.

2. (U) On the evening of August 9, President Kumaratunga addressed the nation on national TV on the current peace process and cohabitation with the UNF led government. (Please see Ref B for the full text.) The speech began in conciliatory tones. To Wit:

-- As Executive President I have the duty to work in cohabitation with a Cabinet comprised of a different Party.

-- ... the ability to put country before self, become essential pre-requisites in the political leadership of both sides.

-- Throughout my political career I have remained resolute that the ethnic issue requires a political settlement. Accordingly, I have extended my fullest support to the peace process.

-- I am not prepared to aggravate the state of political confusion prevailing today by holding another election.

3. (C) After this promising beginning, the President changed moods mid-speech. She referred to the UNF's "mockery of democracy." She repeatedly insinuated that the PM was naive in his handling of the peace process. And she threatened to use her presidential powers to prevent the dismemberment of the state, implying that the PM was prepared to consider breaking Sri Lanka apart if not for her steadfastness. In a happy conclusion, she stated she would continue to support the peace process for the good of the country.

4. (C) Just as the President's speech delivered two distinct and opposing messages, reactions to it have been divided. Harim Peiris, the Presidential Spokesman, stated that the primary message that Kumaratunga was trying to relay in the speech was conciliatory. The President, he asserted, is willing to work with the UNF, as long as the UNF accepts that she will not give up her presidential powers piece-by-piece. Kumaratunga, like the UNF, believes the Executive Presidency should be abolished, but - unlike the UNF - only as part of a comprehensive change in the constitution. Peiris stressed that the President has no intention of dissolving Parliament and that she believes cohabitation will work if the UNF is willing to let it work along current constitutional lines. (Note: Kumaratunga's office is planning to release a statement emphasizing these two points later this evening.)

5. (C) Our soundings around town otherwise were mixed. The Center for Policy Alternatives' Kethesh Loganathan commented that the conciliatory part of the speech was the political message that Kumaratunga was delivering and, in the end, is the rational choice she will take. He added that the more aggressive statements were merely her venting some personal frustration. He believes the UNF will have to mollify Kumaratunga in some manner and that it can and will be done.

6. (C) MP R. Sampanthan of the Tamil National Alliance

stated that if CBK uses her presidential powers as threatened in her speech the government will not be able to function. M.C.M. Iqbal of the Law and Society Trust, normally neutral on the President, does not believe her promises of cohabitation and will not believe them until she accepts a constitutional change.

17. (C) Comment: The President's address to the nation was not a bracing splash of conciliation and optimism. It was equivocal and general enough, however, to leave hope that reconciliation is possible. In this connection, we understand the PM and President will be meeting August 12 or 13 to try to come to terms on a more peaceful coexistence and cooperation. End comment.

WILLS